



## Acting According to Circumstances: Bridging the Gap between the Modules in CFL Learning and Corresponding Strategies

Li, X. (2015). Acting According to Circumstances: Bridging the Gap between the Modules in CFL Learning and Corresponding Strategies. In Z. Guo, & B. Zheng (Eds.), *Recent Developments of Chinese Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Applied Chinese Language Studies VI*. (pp. 195-204). Sinolingua.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Published in:

Recent Developments of Chinese Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Applied Chinese Language Studies VI.

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 30/06/2015

### Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk).

# 因地制宜：弥补中文学习中 单元之间的结构空白以及应对策略

Xiuping LI 李秀萍

Ulster University, UK

**Abstract:** This paper reports on how Chinese modules have been structured within the BA honours in Applied Languages and Translation at Ulster University, UK. There are only three modules in total: one in the first semester of Year 1, one in the first semester of Year 2, and then one in the second semester in Final Year (Year 4). As language learning is an ongoing process, this structure is problematic because it leaves intervals of one semester in each year, and an even wider gap of two years between the first semester of second year and the second semester of Final Year (Year 4); during Year 3 students normally spend a year in a European country but not in China. Consequently, potential risks occur: forgetting what was learnt before, losing interest, or giving up to choose other courses for fear of failing in Chinese. This report focuses on the strategies adopted in order to sustain students' motivation by bridging the gaps in this area, such as organising an HSK training course, cultural events, and topic seminars, plus the development of a new programme. As this is a unique situation in CFL learning, rather than testing any existing theoretical framework, this report presents the data based on the author's one year practical teaching experience on the above programme, the observation of students' learning, the encouragement of students' motivation, assessment, achievement and feedback, as evidence to demonstrate the possibility of solving the gap problem and the importance of programme development and revalidation.

**Keywords:** Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), Applied Languages & Translation (ALT), motivation, cultural knowledge

## **1. Introduction**

This section will present the background to this study and will discuss the need for action, before presenting the aim of this study, including its research questions.

### **1.1 Background and the need for action**

With China's unique status as the world's second largest economy, widely predicted to become the dominant power in the global economy by 2020, and with Chinese as the most popular world language with nearly 2 billion speakers, the attraction of studying the Chinese language is greater than ever before. For students all around the world, the growth of China has made the ability to converse in Chinese a factor which can significantly enhance their employment prospects. As a result, there has been an exponential increase in the number and variety of CFL courses in the UK higher education. Many UK universities now offer Chinese as a full honours degree, a joint honours degree, or in the form of other accredited courses. Locally, across Northern Ireland, Ulster University is unique in offering accredited courses in Chinese, combined with other subjects for BA/BSc degrees; the Confucius Institute at Ulster University (CIUU) is the only Confucius Institute in Northern Ireland. Since the establishment of the Institute, students enrolled on the Applied Languages and Translation degree have had the option to take Chinese courses and are encouraged to take an appropriate level of HSK. This option on the specialist Translation and Interpreting degree, that also combines the study of two European languages, represents an excellent enhancement for students looking to gain the edge in the world of employment. Meanwhile, the School of Modern Languages (SML) was fully aware of the gaps between the modules caused by the existing structure: only three CFL modules are offered within the BA honours Applied Languages and Translation (ALT) degree, one in the first semester of Year 1, one in the first semester of Year 2, and then one in the second semester in Final Year (Year 4). As language learning is an ongoing process and cumulative, this structure is problematic because it leaves intervals of one semester in each year, and an even wider gap of two years between the first semester of second year and the second semester of Final Year (Year 4); during Year 3 students normally spend a year in a European country but not in China. This situation is presented in a table below (see Table 1). These gaps brought a number of disadvantages for the students in their CFL learning, on account of the frequent lengthy breaks between modules. The potential risk of these interruptions to their study of Chinese, is that students could lose confidence or interest in the language. It was the fear that failure

would affect the overall result of their degree that no student chose to study CFL in the final year before 2013-2014. Therefore, finding a way to bridge the gaps between the Chinese modules in the programme became a big challenge and an urgent priority.

Table 1 CFL Modules within ALT degree (before year of 2013–2014)

✓ = Yes; 0= No

Y1 (Sem1)	Y1 (Sem2)	Y2 (Sem1)	Y2 (Sem2)	Y3 (Sem1)	Y3 (Sem2)	Y4 (Sem1)	Y4 (Sem2)
✓	0	✓	0	abroad in European countries	abroad in European countries	0	✓

## 1.2 The aim and research questions

In view of the gaps between CFL modules and the urgent need to bridge them, and on account of the particular demand of students for continuous learning ‘without breaking the chain’, a series of practical strategies aimed at sustaining their motivation throughout their degree should be implemented. In an effort to achieve this aim, the following research questions should be answered:

- Is it possible to bridge the gaps between the existing modules?
- How to bridge the gaps between the existing modules?
- Will the strategies used be effective in promoting the students’ CFL learning?

In response to these questions, the researcher believes that it is certainly possible to bridge the gaps between the existing modules. This can be achieved by creating linguistic and cultural activities which will maintain students’ interest and promote their CFL learning.

## 2. Literature Review

This section reviews the importance of motivation and cultural knowledge in language teaching and learning because many researchers have found that both of these aspects play significant roles in sustaining students’ interest in CFL learning, as discussed below.

### 2.1 The role of motivation

According to Harmer (2001:51), motivation is “some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something.” Ryan and Deci (2000:54) suggest that “to be motivated means to be moved to do something.” Suslu (2006:1) emphasises “Unlike unmotivated

people who have lost impetus and inspiration to act, motivated people are energized and activated to the end of a task.” “‘Interest, curiosity, or a desire to achieve’ (Williams and Burden, 1997:111) are the key factors that compose motivated people. However, they believe that arousing interest is not enough to be motivated. This interest should be sustained” (see Suslu, 2006:1). From this point of view, the CFL students’ learning motivation in the current context needs to be continued rather than being affected by the gap between the modules.

## **2.2 The importance of culture in language teaching and learning**

The nature of the relationship between language and culture and the importance of culture in language teaching and learning have been extensively identified by many researchers, educators, teachers and educational practitioners. For example, Valdes (1990:20) points out “there is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching a language” . “Culture penetrates throughout language learning and teaching...” (Valdes, 1990:20). Linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). Peterson & Coltrane (2003:1) state “...the culture associated with a language cannot be learnt in a few lessons about celebrations, folk songs, or costumes of the area in which the language is spoken.” Peterson & Coltrane (2003: 1) suggest “It is also important to help students understand that cultures are not monolithic” . Jin’s (2012:23) research findings demonstrate that “teachers highlighted the important role of culture in CFL to promote students’ interest and motivation, and influence their emotion.”

In general, the review of the literature suggests a theoretical and practical orientation this study set out to sustain CFL students’ motivation and experience an in-depth knowledge of Chinese culture while developing their linguistic skills in a gradual, progressive development.

## **3. Methods**

In this section, the participants, the practical strategies used to bridge the gaps between the existing CFL modules, including the new courses established will be presented. All the data drew upon the CFL teaching/learning practices in Year 2013/2014.

### **3.1. The participants**

At the regular SML meetings with the student representatives, the high demand for filling in the

gaps between the modules was expressed. Being aware of the gap issue and to meet the students' demand, SML has offered diverse learning opportunities to enhance and expand their studies. All the CFL students within ALT degree were engaged, 24 in total of 3 different levels (Year 1, Year 2 and final year), plus some 'visitors'. They are of different cultural backgrounds (mostly British), Chinese language is a totally foreign language to them. The contact hours with the lecturers are limited: one hour per week for Year 1, 4 hours per week for Year 2, and Year 4, and there were gaps between the modules as indicated in Table 1. To sustain students' high learning motivation and to encourage them to achieve their best, a systematic approach was taken to fill in and bridge the gaps. See below the progressive development of the structure as presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Table 2 CFL Modules within ALT degree (year of 2013–2014)

✓ = Yes; 0= No

Y1 (Sem1)	Y1 (Sem2)	Y2 (Sem1)	Y2 (Sem2)	Y3 (Sem1)	Y3 (Sem2)	Y4 (Sem1)	Y4 (Sem2)
✓	HSK; Cultural activities; Guided Independent study	✓	HSK; Cultural activities; Guided Independent study Trip to China	abroad in European countries	abroad in European countries	Refresher course	✓

Table 3 CFL Modules as a Minor within major subjects (2014–2015 onwards)

✓ = Yes; 0= No

Y1 (Sem1)	Y1 (Sem2)	Y2 (Sem1)	Y2 (Sem2)	Y3 (Sem1)	Y3 (Sem2)	Y4 (Sem1)	Y4 (Sem2)
✓	✓	✓	✓ Trip to China	abroad in European countries	abroad in European countries	✓	✓

Table 4 CFL Modules within ALT degree (2015–2016 onwards after revalidation)

✓ = Yes; 0= No

Y1 (Sem1)	Y1 (Sem2)	Y2 (Sem1)	Y2 (Sem2)	Y3 (Sem1)	Y3 (Sem2)	Y4 (Sem1)	Y4 (Sem2)
✓	✓	✓	✓ Trip to China	abroad in European countries	abroad in European countries	✓	✓

### 3.2. Practical strategies to bridge the module gaps

All the teaching/learning practices will be summarised and listed as below just to serve the purpose of sustaining students' high learning motivation and achieving their best through bridging the

module gaps:

- Offering HSK training course to gain internationally recognised Chinese Proficiency certificates
- Organising Chinese cultural events to experience real Chinese culture, eg trip to China; Chinese New Year activities, food culture, 12 zodiac animals, etc. and traditions to equip the students with proficiency in the cultural knowledge and the language (eg. 饺子, 福)
- Establishing topic seminars to expand knowledge of China and society
- Practising the existing knowledge and skills to consolidate the memory, experiencing Chinese learning philosophy and education, eg 学习 (study) which is the combination of 学 (learning) and 习 (practice), further, 学而时习之, 不亦悦乎? (Isn't it a pleasure to study and practice what you have learned?)
- Using blended learning: integrating online resources into core textbooks or face-to-face tutorials, eg university's Blackboard, MMRU (Multimedia Resources Unit)
- Peer learning: classmates in groups or pair to assist and practise on each other
- Independent study: developing their own learning strategies to boost good effect, eg learning Chinese characters to develop the ability of observation, imagination, analysis and creativity, meaningful radicals, or the differences between 鱼 (n.) and 渔 (v.); thinking prefix and suffix for the Chinese word formation: 电脑, 电话, 电子邮件; 作家, 画家, 科学家, in this way they collected a lot such as with '子': 孩子, 鼻子, 裤子, 房子, 筷子, 饺子; or the funny word meaning due to the different order of character:

法语 French	语法 grammar
去过 to have been to	过去 in the past
好友 good friend	友好 friendly (relations)
前门 front door	门前 in front of the door
女儿 daughter	儿女 children
火山 volcano	山火 mountain fire
牛奶 milk	奶牛 milk cow/dairy cow
鸡蛋 egg	蛋鸡 layer

- Using language assistants to assist the student communicative ability
- Changing and improving the existing course structures to remove the gaps, (see Tables, 2, 3, and 4), such as establishing 6 consecutive modules as Chinese Minor degree strand with BA/BSc major subjects (eg computing with Chinese, business with Chinese, history with Chinese, one of the modern languages (English, German, Spanish) with Chinese.
- Reflective learning: using self- assessment to reflect on their individual progress on the

language skills, following the checklist and the criteria in textbook *Discover China*, such as ‘I can...’ to rank the learning as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 from nearly negative to very positive

- Working as School Helpers in the local Confucius Classrooms in assisting teachers Chinese language teaching and cultural activities, to practise and develop their learnt knowledge and skills as well as to promote confidence.

## 4. Results and discussion

In this section, the achievements as a result of ‘bridging the gaps’ and the feedback from the language assistants and students will be summarised and discussed as listed below:

### 4.1. Results and achievements

In summary, the students’ one year CFL learning results as evidence to prove that this action according to circumstances as the title indicates, is very positive, which means the practical strategies used to bridge the ‘gaps’ are highly effective, and the students have sustained high motivation, feeling confident and rewarding, eg:

- The students of 1st, 2nd, and final year all have passed the coursework and exams
- HSK Levels 1, 2 training class, resulting in a 100% success rate
- The UK National Chinese Calligraphy Competition, all students won prizes, out of total 685 competitors, including 1 student winning 1<sup>st</sup> prize, 3 winning 2<sup>nd</sup> prizes, and 7 being awarded 3<sup>rd</sup> prizes
- Summer School at partner universities, in China also has brought successful results, having improved language skills and gained real experience of everyday life in Chinese communities

### 4.2. The feedback from the language assistants and the students

Below are the selected feedback from the language assistants’ observation and from students’ learning feedback as evidence for the positive solution of bridging the module gaps.

- Feedback from language assistants:

‘From the 12-weeks observation, I have been learning so many skills in CFL teaching and learning. ...And the fantastic thing is the students can recognise most of Chinese characters in PPT or text paper without the help of PINYIN and pronunciation...Training the students to recognize Chinese characters directly by the image of each character is perfectly useful to help student’s further study and



self-study.

‘...the students complete their homework on time ...They do better than before, they can recognise more and more characters, they can get more and more confidence, they can cultivate more and more interest...’.

- Feedback from a final year student (graduate) via email:

‘I thought that overall the exam went well and I was able to answer all the questions as best as I could. I have really enjoyed learning Chinese and feel I have improved a lot since the beginning of the year. I hope to continue with Chinese and complete the other HSK tests after graduation ...’.

## **5. Conclusion**

As the title indicates, this paper reports a trial to solve a special issue: gaps between modules. The research questions have been answered and the aim has been achieved. The practical strategies proved to be effective. In this section, the limitations of this study, implications and the need for further research will be discussed.

### **5.1. Limitations**

This study has not followed any existing theoretical framework due to this being a unique situation for CFL learning and teaching in higher education. No previous study has been found in the literature which was based upon a similar problem. This study has not used conventional research instruments such as questionnaires or interviews. Instead, it has employed the results obtained by the students and feedback from both the language assistants and students as evidence to prove the researcher’s belief that the gaps could be successfully bridged. This data appears to have provided sufficient basis for the analysis undertaken in this study.

### **5.2. Implications**

The current study indicates the important roles of sustaining language learning’s motivation after being aroused, and the cultural knowledge to promote second or foreign language learning. Additionally, a most suitable programme plays a vital role in ensuring learners’ success, and the revalidation of programmes after a period of time is necessary.

### 5.3. Future research

The evidence of positive results from the previous one year's trial, coupled with the development of the CFL teaching programmes from this year 2014-2015 onwards in this area, it is believed that the new structures will create a highly favourable situation for the students at Ulster University in their CFL learning. So it would be interesting to do another research on the results of using new programmes, additionally a study of comparison with the students of doing Minor degree and optional modules within ALT degree would bring a new conclusion.

### References

- Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Essex: Longman Press.
- Jin, T. (2012). Intercultural competence in the learning of Chinese as a foreign language in the UK – an exploratory study. In M. Xing & L. M. Li (Eds.), *Developing Pedagogies for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in Higher Education: Applied Chinese Language Studies IV*. (pp. 15-29). Sinolingua London Ltd., UK.
- Krasner, L. (1999). The role of culture in language teaching. *Dialog on Language Institute*, 13(1-2), 79-88.
- Peterson, E. & Coltrane, B. (2003). Cultural in second language teaching. *ERIC DIGEST*, EDO-FL-03-09 DECEMBER 2003, 1-2.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*: Vol. 25, 54-67.
- Suslu, S. (2006). Motivation of ESL Teachers. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. 12 (1), retrieved September 18, 2014, from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Suslu-TeacherMotivation.html>
- Valdes, J. (1990). The Inevitability of Teaching and Learning Culture in a Foreign Language Course. In B. Harrison (Ed.) *Culture and the Language Classroom*. London: Macmillan Modern English, in association with The British Council, 20-30.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers: a Social Constructivist Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Author information

Dr Xiuping LI is a Lecturer in Chinese, Chinese Course Director and an Adviser of Studies for Students on BA Honours Applied Languages and Translation at School of Modern Languages, Ulster

University, UK. She has over 30 years' experience of teaching EFL and CFL in a variety of contexts in China and the UK. Her research interests focus on EFL & CFL teaching/learning skills and strategies, intercultural communications and adaptations. Her main publications include the joint-authored 'Rote learning in Chinese Culture: Reflecting Active Confucian-based Memory Strategies' with Dr J. Cutting, in L. Jin & M. Cortazzi (eds) *Researching Chinese Learners: Skills, Perceptions and Intercultural Adaptations* (2011). Email: x.li2@ulster.ac.uk